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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: social integration

Statement by: Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Presentation Association, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

Statement

1. During the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, a top-down approach was employed which brought about economic growth, but only for some members of society. The masses of people living in poverty did not benefit during those years. Now, at the beginning of the Second United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, the gap between the few who possess the world's wealth and those who live in extreme poverty is deeper. We urgently need a process that will enhance a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches towards development, peace and security, with the goal of ensuring everyone a standard of living adequate for health and well-being.

2. The report of the Secretary General (A/64/157, para. 17) states that:

> "Social integration entails promoting a people-centred approach to poverty eradication. ... Their participation should be considered not as an add-on

* E/CN.5/2010/1.

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element, but rather as central to poverty reduction efforts, so that these strategies and programmes can be designed in a way that respects the dignity and culture of people living in poverty, uses their skills, knowledge and creativity and assists them to organize and become educated about their rights."

3. "Placing people at the centre of our concerns for development" was the new consensus established by the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action. People living in poverty feel powerless and alienated because they do not have say in the decisions that affect their lives. They lack structures that provide opportunities to become active citizens and exercise their rights and responsibilities. The electoral constituencies of the different levels in representative democracy are so big that the people living in poverty, the "small people", have no forum for meaningful participation, for their "small voices" to be heard. Effective and sustained participation can take place only when people are ensured a viable forum to have a say in decision-making that affects their lives.

4. The most telling touchstone that identifies exclusion or non-integration is the way participation of various sorts is denied to people, especially participation in decision-making and in governance. In many places people have no access to forums of decision-making because of poverty, race or gender. This perpetuates exclusion. People need to have forums where they can come together to discuss their situation, identify the root causes of their problems, make decisions, set time-bound goals and monitor the processes. When people search together, plan together, implement together and monitor together, they cannot but be included and integrated. Such forums have to be accessible to all. They must also be the right size so that the excluded, the poor and the powerless find them friendly.

5. Irene Khan, Secretary-General of Amnesty International, in her book *The Unheard Truth: Poverty and Human Rights*, argues that people can only truly have a say in their own future in an environment where respect for basic rights is assured. This is what is called a voice-enabling environment. She also states that the voice-enabling environment encourages diverse groups to organize and make their views known: "That is the surest way to create an engaged citizenry, and to nurture a culture where conversations about development, economic policies and budget choices can flourish".

6. The "Shared Societies Project" of the Club de Madrid, emphasizes, in its commitment II, the necessity for inclusive processes

> "Create opportunities for minorities and marginalized groups and communities to be consulted about their needs and their perception of the responsiveness of state and community structures to meet those needs".

7. Commitment II calls for the following actions:

- Establish consultative councils on which all identity groups are represented and with the statutory right to be consulted on the impact of government policies.
- Encourage identity groups to create representative bodies with which government and other identity groups can dialogue to explore and understand issues and concerns that affect those groups.

- Create systems of community meetings that allow community members to express their views and air their grievances.

- Create the statutory duty of public bodies to include representatives of smaller identity groups in their boards and other decision-making bodies.

8. Some examples of success stories of social inclusion include: the experiments of neighbourhood assemblies of some states in India (see www.kudumbashree.org and www.ncnworld.org); the children's parliaments and their multi-tiered federations in India (www.childrenparliament.info); local Solidarity Governance of Porto Alegre (http://www2.portoalegre.rs.gov.br/observatorio/) and the Participation Law of Bolivia (http://hdr.undp.org/docs/publications/background_papers/2003/HDR2003_Calderon_Pinc.pdf). The common trait evident in all these success stories, which paved the way for widespread inclusion, is that these forums for participatory decision-making are at the neighbourhood level. The non-governmental organizations play a significant role in all these examples of ensuring broad social inclusion.

Recommendations

Governments should:

- Bring forums for political, social and economic decision-making down to the grass-roots level by means of territorially inclusive neighbourhood forums. It is imperative that such forums remain small-sized, face-to-face communities at every level so that the small voices of the marginalized and the weak do not get drowned out or lost, and thus go unlistened to, or that people living in poverty remain without a voice.

- Ensure that such neighbourhood forums are federated at various levels of governance for wider reach and impact.

- Promote partnerships of women, youth, people with disabilities, indigenous people, older people and migrants through their networks based on this type of neighbourhood forum so that they can all be involved in the process of becoming active citizens.

- Initiate a process for practical and inclusive citizenship training for children by organizing territorially responsive children's neighbourhood parliaments and federations.

- Constantly reinforce such territorially inclusive neighbourhood forums through a process of convergence, whereby whatever can be done is done through such forums (for example, organizing self-help groups of poor women as is done in Kerala and organizing community health through neighbourhood health communities, neighbourhood-based planning and implementation and environmental monitoring).

- Utilize the process of smaller neighbourhood groups and a federated structure to foster universal inclusion, assuring the fulfilment of the principles of the Second United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2008-2017) by upholding the value of maximum participation of people living in poverty.

- Make participatory strategies a regular part of their processes through various means, such as including participation as part of job descriptions, offering incentives for success in reaching out to those in poverty and ensuring that progress is measured.
- Partner with non-governmental organizations and civil society to engage people living in poverty in processes affecting their lives.

Note: The present statement is endorsed by Congregations of St. Joseph, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Federation of Women Lawyers. International Federation of Women in Legal Careers, Salesian Missions, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Greek Orthodox Archdiocesan Council, International Peace Research Association, UNANIMA International, Vivat International, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.